

Mary Jo Wills '73

A portrait of Mary Jo Wills '73, a woman with short, graying hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark blue blazer over a white top and a gold necklace. The background features a stylized American flag with stars and stripes.

Former U.S. ambassador works to bring **positive change** to Africa through academic outreach

A self-proclaimed lifelong learner, alumna Mary Jo Wills '73 says her strong liberal arts education at Chatham prepared her well for her 30-year career with the U.S. Foreign Service. Mary Jo recently returned to the United States after serving as the U.S. ambassador to the island republics of Mauritius and Seychelles, which are located in the Indian Ocean, about 100 miles east of mainland Africa.

Nominated by President Barack Obama, Mary Jo was confirmed as ambassador by the U.S. Senate in December 2009. She arrived in Mauritius in February 2010, living there in Port Louis, and traveling often to the Seychelles.

Her priorities as ambassador, she says, "included first and foremost the welfare of U.S. citizens who lived, worked, or visited Mauritius and the Seychelles."

Mary Jo describes Foreign Service officers as "generalists." "A strong broad-based foundation of knowledge and critical thinking is required to contribute to possible solutions or developing plans to address complex international challenges," she says.

“I believe in the value and efficacy of a strong liberal arts education,” says Mary Jo. “I have said many times and to many people that I learned to think at Chatham. I learned to be open to ideas and how to manipulate them to solve problems and develop strategies, drawing on an extensive basis of general knowledge.”

“Like many students who come from hard-working families with limited means, I desperately wanted to go to college, and the challenge was to find an institution that met my academic aspirations as well as one that was willing and able to provide financial assistance,” she says. “Fortunately, Chatham offered me a scholarship and the opportunity to receive a first-class education.”

In addition to her bachelor’s degree in history from Chatham, Mary Jo received her master’s degree in business administration from Virginia Tech and her master’s degree in national security strategy from the National War College. She has also earned a certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies from the Virginia Tech Center for Public Administration and Policy, where she is currently a doctoral candidate.

Mary Jo recalls the challenge of balancing work and scholarship as a Chatham student. “As was the case with most scholarship students at the time, I was a working scholar, and I can remember distinctly bussing trays in the cafeteria, working in the bookstore, as well as off campus jobs with government agencies.”

These prioritizing and time-management skills honed at Chatham have been essential in the varied roles she has served in Foreign Service.

With a career quite literally all over the map, Mary Jo has served as deputy principal officer at the U.S. Consulate in Milan, Italy; chief of the Special Trade Activities Division and deputy chief of the Textile Trade Policy Division; and international economist in the European Bureau’s Office of Economic and Regional Affairs.



At a port in the Seychelles, Mary Jo is “piped aboard” a visiting naval ship by the boatswain. This naval tradition honors flag-rank officers and important guests as they board.

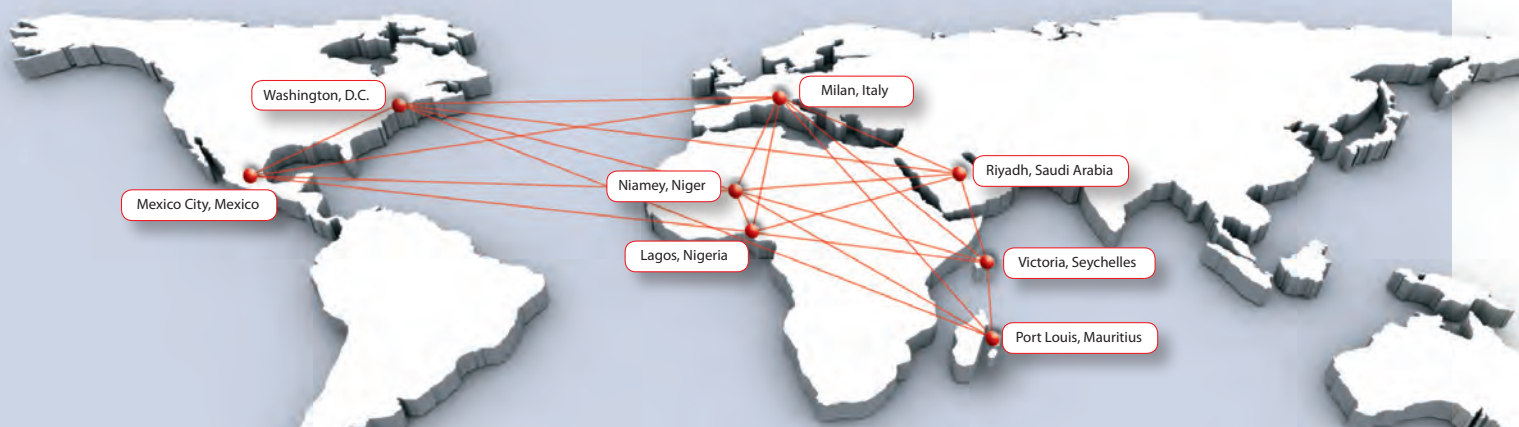
Earlier in her career, Mary Jo was the desk officer for Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. She has also served at other posts abroad in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Recognized for her extraordinary performance, Mary Jo has been twice awarded the U.S. Department of State’s Superior Honor Award, in addition to the department’s Meritorious Honor Award.

“As ambassador, my job was to be the primary spokesperson for U.S. policies, interests, and values to the governments of Mauritius and the Seychelles on good governance; building strong democratic institutions; strengthening health systems; preventing, mitigating, and resolving conflict; and addressing transitional challenges – including, but not limited to, trafficking in persons, illegal substances, illegal fishing, piracy, and maritime security.

“Above all, I learned about the ties that join all people in a common purpose, and that these ties can overcome legitimate differences of opinions or points of view.”

Mary Jo served in the following cities:



One particular issue facing Mauritius and the Seychelles is climate change, says Mary Jo. Both countries are at risk of losing landmass due to rising ocean levels. Drought is also a concern with such dependence on season rains, limited ground water, and shifts in wind patterns.

With a heavy reliance on the ocean for food, the islands harvest what they can from the waters and ship in what they cannot grow or manufacture themselves.

“Preserving the **environment** and disposal of waste are also of great importance, because tourism contributes significantly to both countries’ economies,” Mary Jo says.

“These are among some of the most beautiful islands on earth, and both countries take pride in protecting their environments and fragile ecosystems,” she says.

While she called these two islands home, she spent what little free time she had taking nature walks, sitting on the beach, reading, and appreciating the beauty of the Indian Ocean.

She also had the opportunity to see rare wildlife on the islands of Cousin and Praslin, both among the inner islands of the Seychelles archipelago. Cousin Island is a special reserve for sea birds and endemic land birds as well as the most important breeding site for Hawksbill turtles in the Western Indian Ocean. The reserve is managed solely by local staff and benefits communities on the neighboring Praslin Island through eco-tourism.

Now that she has returned home to the United States, Mary Jo has recently embarked on an exciting new assignment as a special advisor to the United States African Development Foundation (USADF), where her focus is on outreach to academia on models of foreign assistance, interacting with students and faculty, among others.

The USADF is an independent federal agency established to support African designed, led, and managed solutions that address grassroots economic and social problems in conflict and post-conflict communities. Providing grants directly to underserved and marginalized community groups and enterprises, the USADF helps organizations create such tangible benefits as increasing or sustaining the number of jobs in a community, improving income levels, and addressing social development needs.

“These are people who have been left behind because of geographic isolation, ethnicity, victimization, or other factors that have prevented participation in the economic, social, or political systems in their country,” says Mary Jo. “Often they have




Mary Jo cuts the ribbon at a ceremony for the inauguration of the American Corner, named in honor of Harper Lee, at the historic Carnegie Library of Curepipe on the Island of Mauritius. American Corners are partnerships between the public affairs sections of United States Embassies and host institutions and provide access to current and reliable information from and about the United States via book collections and programming.

been the recipients of humanitarian assistance. And they all want to earn a living, have a home, and send their children to school just like we do.”

Mary Jo shares a recent example of the positive change USADF helps to bring to communities in Africa. The Gahaya Links, a cooperative in Rwanda, received USADF grants that have benefited more than 4,000 women, and some men. For the U.S. market, it produces baskets; jewelry made from paper beads; and, soon, textiles.

“You might recognize their products in upscale department stores and discount stores,” says Mary Jo. “It is truly inspiring to see their enthusiasm and business savvy obtained through a relatively small investment by the people of the United States.”

Academia is a new area of outreach for USADE. “I would like to reach as many institutions and students as possible in the time I will be here,” says Mary Jo. “My challenge will be to match my enthusiasm and means available with that goal. But, I love a challenge – especially when I consider the good that can come from more people, institutions, and organizations gaining knowledge of and supporting an organization that produces so much good on behalf of the government and people of the United States. USADE, through the dedication of its small staff and small budget, helps people to change their lives.” 

DID YOU KNOW? Sustainability has increasingly become the driving force for thousands of new jobs. Chatham offers an online certificate in sustainable management and beginning in the fall, will offer a master of sustainability program. Both transdisciplinary programs, the master’s degree program will take students through academically sound, professionally oriented solutions to improve economic development, social justice, and the **environment**. The online certificate can be completed in as little as a year and significantly develops students’ professional credentials, skills, and knowledge in the field of sustainability.